

Sh'mot

שמות "Names"

Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

Torah Together



A significant length of time has passed since the events recorded at the end of **Genesis**. This portion introduces us to Moses, with whom we'll spend the rest of our time in the *Torah*. Sometimes it's helpful to remember that Moses wrote the book of **Genesis**. He recorded stories that had been passed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years.

1. The Oppression of the Israelites - 1:1-22

a) About how many years do you think passed between the events at the end of **Genesis** and the beginning of **Exodus**? Why do you suppose the Israelites stayed in Egypt so long? How did they fare?

God told Abram that the Israelites would spend 400 years in slavery in a foreign land. They were comfortable and had good land for raising livestock. They also did not have the same commitment to God's promise of the land that their fathers had had. They "were fruitful and multiplied greatly" in Egypt.

b) Of what was the new Pharaoh "who did not know about Joseph" afraid? Do you think his fears were well-founded? What did the Egyptians do? What was the effect on the Hebrews? How did this effect the Egyptians?

Pharaoh was afraid that they might grow too numerous and rise up and conquer the Egyptians. Or worse yet, that they might leave Egypt. It is unlikely that these semi-nomadic shepherds would rebel. However, they might choose to leave the land. The Egyptians chose to enslave them and oppress them. However, the more they oppressed them, the more the Hebrew population grew. This angered the Egyptians even more and they became disgusted with them.

c) As the Hebrews continued to thrive and grow, what was Pharaoh's next tactic to subdue them? How did the midwives respond to Pharaoh's command? How did God view their behavior? Can we draw any general conclusion from their behavior?

Pharaoh's next tactic was to instruct the Hebrew midwives to kill the male Hebrew babies as they were being born. Since the midwives feared God more than Pharaoh, they disobeyed and told him that Hebrew wives gave birth quickly, before they could be there. God blessed them with "houses" of their own, which probably meant families. It is interesting that God preserved the names of these midwives and did not even mention the name of the Pharaoh.

The Hebrew name for the book of **Exodus** (*Sh'mot* which means 'names') is taken from the first line of the *Torah* portion, "These are the names . . ." The name of each *Torah* portion is obtained in this manner.

Scripture Link:

Genesis 15:13–16 may shed some light on the length of time the Israelites spent in Egypt.

From Visitors to Slaves

As we begin the book of **Exodus**, the Israelites were still living in Egypt, although their living situation had changed dramatically since the time of Joseph.

Scripture Link:

Do you think **Genesis 12:3** might apply to the mid-wives and the Egyptians?

Scripture Link:

Can you find any parallels between the Pharaoh's actions and the story told in **Matthew 2:13-18**?

Moses and Water

In the Egyptian language, Moses' name was "Monios" which means "to draw out of the water." It would seem appropriate for Pharaoh's daughter to choose this name.

There is a tradition (not scripturally based) that the Pharaoh was aware of a prophecy that predicted that the savior of the Hebrews would be undone by water. This may have been his reason for choosing to have the male Hebrew babies thrown into the Nile River. It might also be noted that Moses was indeed undone by water in the incident at Kadesh. (See **Numbers 20:1-13**)

d) What was Pharaoh's "final solution" to the problem of the Hebrews? Does this remind you of any similar circumstances in Biblical history? What parallels can you draw from these situations? **Pharaoh's final solution was to have all Hebrew baby boys thrown into the Nile. This is similar to Herod's command that all babies in and around Bethlehem two years old and under were to be killed (Matthew 2:16). Was Pharaoh also trying to stop a savior from being born? One can also draw parallels to Haman in the book of Esther and even to Hitler's holocaust.**

2. The birth and upbringing of Moses - 2:1-10

a) From what tribe were Moses' mother and father? Do you think it was possible to keep the birth of Moses a secret for three months without God's help?

Both Moses' mother and father (Jochebed and Amram) were Levites. An infant under the age of three months is often fairly quiet and inactive although it would have certainly taken God's involvement to keep the birth itself hidden.

b) What aspects of the episode of Moses in the basket show that his mother's actions were not impulsive? What unexpected blessing did she receive from God?

The fact that Jochebed had to acquire the basket and coat it with tar shows that this was a premeditated act. Further, involving Moses' sister showed foresight. Even so, it must have taken great faith to let the basket go, floating down the Nile past Pharaoh's daughter. God rewarded her faith by not only allowing her to continue feeding and help raise Moses, but even getting paid to do so.

c) Do you think Pharaoh's daughter had any doubt that the baby Moses was a Hebrew? What is the significance of Moses' name? Who named him?

Pharaoh's daughter said, "This is one of the Hebrew's babies." (2:6) (Perhaps she noticed he was circumcised.) It appears that she named him Monios, which means "to draw out of water," in Egyptian. The Hebrew word is Moshe and in English, Moses.

d) **Hebrews 11:24-26** and **Acts 7:20-22** shed additional light on Moses' upbringing. Do you think he always knew he was Hebrew and not Egyptian? What does this say about his character?

Although raised as royalty in Pharaoh's household, it appears that Moses always knew that he was a Hebrew. That he chose to identify with his people, and not succumb to the power of his position in Pharaoh's court, speaks of Moses' sense of justice and responsibility.

3. Moses flees to Midian - 2:10-25

a) Why do you suppose Moses was watching “his own people at their hard labor”? Was his attack on the Egyptian slave master justified? Did Moses know it was wrong? Describe the incident that occurred the next day that caused Moses to flee Egypt.

Read Acts 7:23-29. It may have been that Moses was beginning to sense his destiny as the deliverer of his people. In any case, the murder of the Egyptian was unjustified and he knew it (“he looked this way & that”). When he tried to break up a quarrel the next day, he found out that others knew of his murderous act, so he fled. He was also rebuffed as “ruler & judge over us.”

b) What do you know about Midian? About how far did Moses travel? Who were the Midianites and what do you suppose “a priest of Midian” was?

Midian was the 4th of Abraham’s sons by Keturah, his wife after the death of Sarah. (Genesis 25:1-2) The land of Midian is located in the northwest corner of the Arabian peninsula, about 500 miles southeast of Egypt. Reuel, a “priest” of Midian was probably the head of the clan and a religious teacher. As a son of Abraham, he was at least aware of Yahweh, although perhaps not a committed follower.

c) Describe the incident at the well where Moses met his future wife, Zipporah.

Moses drives off the bully shepherds and helps water the flocks of Reuel.

d) This passage describes the birth of Moses’ first son. What is the significance of his name?

Gershom means “an alien there”.

4. Moses and the Burning Bush - 3:1-22

a) Here Moses’ father-in-law is identified as Jethro, not Reuel. Are they the same person? Given that Moses was living in Midian, where do you think Mt. Horeb might be located?

Some think that Reuel was the grandfather and Jethro was the father. The more common explanation is that these are two names for the same person. Perhaps one name was a title. Since Midian is located in northwestern Arabia, it makes sense that Mt. Horeb (or Mt. Sinai) is located there also.

b) Can you find any significance in the fact that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush? What is the first thing God instructs Moses to do? Why is this significant?

A bush is a very commonplace thing, symbolizing God’s presence at all times in all things. Fire is often associated with God’s appearance (e.g., “blazing torch” in Genesis 15:17). God first instructs Moses to remove his sandals as he is on holy ground. The holiness of God is his foremost attribute.

Scripture Link:

In **Acts 7:23-29**, the new believer, Stephen, is retelling this story. Does Stephen’s version of the story give you any additional insight?

Scripture Link:

Genesis chapter **25** tells of Abraham’s life after the death of Sarah and of his descendants. Note particularly the names of the sons he had later in life.

Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai?

Just as there is some controversy or the exact location of this mountain, there is also some confusion over its name. Here, Moses clearly calls it Mt. Horeb and identifies it as the “mountain of God.” Later it is called Mt. Sinai, a name which may have been taken from the region in which people believed it was located.

Moses Reluctance

Based on his initial responses to God's words, it would appear that Moses was not very enthusiastic about undertaking the mission that God had for him. Analyze Moses' objections to God's plan. How many times did Moses object? How do you think God viewed this exchange with Moses? At this stage in his life, Moses certainly seems reluctant. How do you think you might have felt if you were in Moses' place?

c) How does Moses react when God identifies Himself? Why do you think he did this?

Moses "hid his face because he was afraid to look at God." This is a typical response to the holiness of God, caused by awareness of our sinfulness.

d) In verses 7 - 10, God very clearly tells Moses what He intends to do and why. What is Moses' response? Is this the response of a man of great faith and a willing servant? What does God say to reassure Moses?

Moses says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and do this?" Moses first response is reluctance, fear, lack of confidence, inadequacy. God tells him that he will be with him and Israel will worship God at that very spot.

e) What is Moses next objection in verse 13? How does God respond to this objection?

Moses says he won't know how to refer to God by name. God responds with the statement "I AM THAT I AM." which is a play on the Tetragrammaton, YHWH (see also John 8:58). Much discussion can be centered around God's name. Most Bibles translate YHWH as LORD, in upper case letters.

"And God said to Moses, 'I AM THAT I AM.' And He said, So you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' And God said to Moses again, You shall say this to the sons of Israel, the LORD the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My title from generation to generation. "

Exodus 3:14-15

f) In verses 16 - 22, God goes into much greater detail in his instructions to Moses. Summarize what God tells Moses here. **God tells Moses that the Israelites will listen to him but that Pharaoh will not and that God will "strike Egypt with wonders." They will also plunder Egypt.**

Was it appropriate for Moses to ask God his name?

The Egyptian culture in which the Israelites lived involved the worship of many different gods, all with different names. Pharaoh himself was even considered to be a god. The Hebrews, on the other hand, worshiped only one god, and at least up to this point, their god didn't even have a name. How could the one and only god of a nation of slaves, and that an unnamed god, compare with the many apparently powerful gods of Egypt? So it makes sense that Moses would want to know the name of the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the Hebrew text of the *Torah*, the name that God gives himself (translated here as "the LORD") is יהוה . In Hebrew, which is read from right to left, these are the four Hebrew letters yod, hey, vav, hey. This is called the "tetragrammaton," a Greek word meaning "four letters." The Hebrew phrase translated as "I AM THAT I AM" (or sometimes as "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE") can be derived from the Hebrew characters in the tetragrammaton. These four Hebrew characters are usually transliterated in English as YHWH because the Hebrew י (yod) makes a "Y" sound, the Hebrew ה (hey) makes an "H" sound and the Hebrew ו (vav) makes a "W" or "V" sound in English.

Aside from reading from right to left, another interesting characteristic of the Hebrew language is that a word's vowel sounds are written as a series of dots and dashes above and below the characters. Once a person is fairly familiar with the language, the words can be recognized without the vowel sounds and so they are often omitted. Such has been the case with the tetragrammaton and today no one really knows what the original vowel sounds were.

In an effort to keep from violating the third commandment ("You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."), *Torah* and Bible translators chose to just not pronounce God's name at all. If reading, when they came across the tetragrammaton, instead of pronouncing God's holy name, they would substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which means "lord," a term of respect as it is in English. The upshot of all this is that today, no one knows for sure how to pronounce God's name. However, if it were possible to pronounce God's name in English, it might sound like "Yahweh" which is what many people use.

Today, in most English Bibles, if you see the words "the LORD," where "lord" is written in all capital letters, then it has been translated from the tetragrammaton. If you're not uncomfortable pronouncing what might be the actual name of God, you can substitute Yahweh for this and be correct. The effect of doing this can be quite striking. For example, in the story of the Exodus, when Moses is having his ten confrontations with Pharaoh, if you substitute "Yahweh" for "the LORD" when reading, it has the effect of giving the God of the Israelites a name (which is appropriate). This tends to emphasize the fact that our God, the God of the Israelites, was engaging the gods of Egypt in battle, which is exactly what was happening. There are many other places where using the actual name of God can add to your understanding of the Bible.

What about Jehovah?

If you take the vowel sounds from the Hebrew word for "lord," *Adonai*, (ah-oh-ah) and use them with the consonants from the tetragrammaton, (Y-H-W-H) you get something like "Yahovah." Then if you translate that into English, exchanging the "Y" for a "J", you get "Jehovah." This is actually where the word came from that some English Bibles use for the name of God.

Moses and the Circumcision of his Son

This passage (**Exodus 4:24-26**) is one of the most cryptic in the *Torah*. Commentators have had difficulties with it for centuries. Perhaps the most reasonable explanation is that there was a disagreement between Moses and his wife, Zipporah, over the rite of circumcision. Not being raised as a Hebrew, she may have found the rite barbaric and objected to it being carried out on their infant sons. God, however, required it and held Moses accountable to see that it was done. Do you think this may explain the events described in this passage? We will see that after this event, apparently Zipporah and the children returned to Midian and Moses went on to Egypt alone.

5. Signs for Moses - 4:1-17

a) What is Moses' next objection in chapter 4, verse 1? How does God respond to this objection? What three signs were given to Moses and what was their purpose?

"What if the Israelites don't believe me?" God responds by giving Moses the rod that turns into a snake, the leprous hand, and the ability to turn Nile water into blood.

b) What is Moses' next objection in verse 10? What is God's response? Do you sense God becoming a little impatient?

"I'm not a good speaker." God reminds Moses that He made Moses and that He is certainly able to help Moses speak appropriately.

c) What is Moses' final objection in verse 13? How does God respond? What attributes of God are revealed in His verbal exchange with Moses?

"Please send someone else." God gets angry but tells Moses that he'll send his brother Aaron to help him. God shows patience, compassion, understanding, and love to Moses while being firm and resolute.

6. Moses returns to Egypt - 4:18-31

a) Verse 18 relates Moses' conversation with Jethro. Can you imagine how such a conversation might have gone? Note that Moses seems determined to obey God.

Moses and Jethro probably spoke long into the night about Moses' experience. Jethro may have even helped Moses make the decision to obey God. In any case, Jethro sends him on his way with his blessing.

b) On Moses' trip back to Egypt with his wife and sons, God tells Moses what He intends to do to Pharaoh. What do you find interesting about this exchange?

God tells Moses that He will harden Pharaoh's heart. He also tells Moses to tell Pharaoh that since Pharaoh refused to let his son (Israel) go, then He will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son, a foreshadowing of the Passover.

c) Verses 24 - 26 relate a confusing story about the circumcision of Moses' son. What do you think this story is about? Why do you think Moses hadn't circumcised his son?

It appears that Moses and his wife disagreed about the need to circumcise their sons. It also appears that God demanded obedience and threatened Moses' life. Zipporah seems to have reluctantly obeyed and may have thrown the bloody foreskin at Moses feet in disgust. Many think at this point, Moses sent his wife and sons back to Midian (see Exodus 18:1-6). This is all hypothetical.

d) Moses and Aaron's first meeting with the elders of the Israelites seemed to go well. How did they respond to the news that Moses had come to relieve their oppression?

Moses and Aaron's first meeting with the elders went well. After seeing the signs God gave them, "they believed" and "bowed down and worshiped."

7. Bricks without Straw - 5:1 - 6:1

a) In their first meeting with Pharaoh, what did Moses and Aaron request of him? What did Pharaoh say to them in response? What did he do to show his displeasure?

Moses requested that the Israelites be allowed to travel three days into the desert to sacrifice to their God, YHWH. Pharaoh responded by saying, "Who is this YHWH that I should obey him? You're keeping the people from their work." Pharaoh then gave an edict that the Israelites now had to gather their own straw for the bricks they produced and yet not decrease their output.

b) How did Pharaoh's edict affect the Israelites? As they fell short of their required quota of bricks, who was punished and how?

By adding to their workload, they were unable to meet their quota of bricks. The Israelite foremen were beaten for failing to meet quota.

c) What did the Israelite foremen do to try to correct the situation that caused them to fail to meet their quotas? Were they successful? Did they learn the reason for Pharaoh's new edict?

The foremen went before Pharaoh to explain why they were no longer able to meet their quota. Pharaoh grew angry, called them lazy, and said that Moses' request to go and sacrifice to their God had caused him to give his edict and that the edict stood: they must produce their full quota without straw.

d) Just after learning the cause of their problems, the Israelite foremen happen to meet Moses and Aaron. What did they say to Moses and Aaron?

They blamed Moses and Aaron for their difficult situation, saying that they had made the Israelites "a stench" to Pharaoh.

e) Appropriately, Moses went to God with his problems. What was God's response?

Moses complained that God had "not rescued his people at all." God said that He would use His mighty hand to cause Pharaoh to let the people go.

Moses Early "Success"

This exchange between God and Moses (**Exodus 5:22-23**) is very emotional. Because we know the "rest of the story," we can see that Moses was just beginning the work that God had for him. From Moses' perspective, however, God wasn't meeting His part of the bargain. Moses had gone to Pharaoh and given him God's message, but God had "not rescued His people at all!" It would be interesting to know how Moses felt about this exchange about 40 years later.

Digging deeper

1. This is our first encounter with Moses, with whom we will spend the remainder of the Torah. Spend a few minutes analyzing the personality traits exhibited by Moses in these first few chapters of Exodus. List them and keep the list to compare with later events in his life which we will study.

In these chapters, Moses appears impulsive, acting before thinking as he killed the Egyptian slave driver. He is fearful as he flees Egypt rather than face the consequences. He seems reluctant and uncommitted in his conversation with God and lacking in self-confidence and faith.

2. Put yourself in the shoes of the “Israelite foremen appointed by Pharaoh’s slave drivers” in Exodus 5:14. Try to imagine how it would have felt to be responsible for continuing to meet their quota of bricks with fewer resources than before. What expectations do you think they had for their meeting with Pharaoh?

The Israelite foremen faced the “dilemma of middle management.” They were expected to produce more with less resources. They must have thought to themselves, “Surely there must be some mistake. Pharaoh is a reasonable man and he cannot expect us to make the same number of bricks when we have the additional work of gathering our own straw. If we present the facts to him, he will draw the obvious conclusion, and reduce the quota.” They were wrong, finding Pharaoh illogically insistent that they produce the same number of bricks. They also learned that it was Moses and Aaron who had angered Pharaoh. Their reaction upon meeting them was predictable. It is likely that many students have faced similar situations in their own lives.

For each *Torah* portion (*Parashah*), the ancient Hebrew scribes defined a corresponding reading from the prophets, called the *Haftarah* (conclusion). These passages are tied to the *Torah* portion by a key idea or theme. Also, after the New Testament (*Brit Hadashah*) was formalized, Bible scholars chose from it passages that also complement the *Torah* portion. These often provide additional insight into the *Torah* portion and can lead to a better understanding of the unity and consistency of God’s word.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22-23 or Jeremiah 1:1 – 2:3
Brit Hadashah : Matthew 22:23-33, 41-46; Mark 12:18-27, 35-37;
Luke 20:27-44 Acts 3:12-15, 5:27-32; 7:17-36; 22:12-16; 24:14-16;
Hebrews 11:23-26